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PUTIN'S PAYOUT: 12 WAYS TRUMP HAS SUPPORTED PUTIN'S FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA

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In May 2017, the FBI formally opened a counterintelligence investigation into the President of the United States to determine whether he had been working on behalf of the Russian government, according to *The New York Times*. The inquiry into the President was formally folded into the Special Counsel's investigation, and its current status remains unclear. Whether or not the Kremlin is exercising direct influence over an American president, one thing is clear: the actions of the Trump administration have constantly served to advance the foreign policy agenda of the Kremlin.

The general details of the Russian government's support for US President Donald Trump in the 2016 election are clear. Russia conducted a massive disinformation campaign targeting American voters; hacked Trump's opponents' email and strategically released the information; and used American fronts to funnel money into the American political system to support Trump's campaign and influence Republican policies.

Considering Russia's geopolitical position in 2016, this was an incredibly risky campaign to launch. By 2016, the global community had diplomatically sidelined Putin for his actions in Crimea and Donbass; Russia's economy had stalled amid declining oil prices; and Putin himself faced pressure from his inner circle, themselves facing pressure from US sanctions. Russia and Putin were both vulnerable to an escalation of outside pressure. Given this position, provoking potential retaliatory measures from America and the international community could have put Putin in an increasingly perilous position. His risk-taking succeeded beyond any expectation.

Since the beginning of Trump's administration, the White House has demonstrated a clear and consistent pattern of behavior toward Russia by not only calling for better relations with the Kremlin but also actively advancing Russia's foreign policy objectives. This does not mean the Kremlin explicitly directed or coordinated with the Trump administration on the decisions and actions below. Instead, it shows that Putin's gamble that a Trump administration would benefit Russia has paid off. The Kremlin has greatly benefited from the election of Donald Trump, a president whose foreign policy decisions and outlook have turned American foreign policy on its head to the great advantage of Putin's Russia.

There is no clear geopolitical or policy rationale for Trump's behavior, which often comes at the cost of longstanding American foreign policy interests. As political scientist Ian Bremmer assessed, "No serious foreign policy analyst I know (nor any ex-Trump- Admin official) has a good explanation for why Trump is so singularly enamored with Russian President Vladimir Putin."

Nor is there a political rationale. Amid Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe and near constant revelations about the Trump campaign's collusion with Russia, it would almost certainly benefit Trump to distance himself from Putin and dispel rumors that he is beholden to his Russian counterpart. Instead, at every opportunity, Trump has embraced Putin and adopted positions that align perfectly with Russia's foreign policy goals, often favoring the Kremlin over his own country.

In other words, Putin's return on investment from Trump's presidency has been significant.

Here are twelve ways that Putin has received his payout:

1. **Putin's Goal:** Weaken and divide the transatlantic alliance.
    - **Putin's Payout:**Trump undermines US relationships with European allies and calls the US's commitment to NATO into question.
2. **Putin's Goal:** Degrade the European Union and foster pro-Russian political movements.
    - **Putin's Payout:**Trump attacks the EU and actively supports anti-EU, Kremlin-backed parties.
3. **Putin's Goal:** Disrupt American leadership and dominance of the global economic order.
    - **Putin's Payout:** Trump is eagerly pushing for an all-out trade war with Europe
4. **Putin's Goal:** Build global resentment and distrust towards the US and stoke anti-American sentiment.
    - **Putin's Payout:** America's closest allies are explicitly suspicious and distrusting of the US because of Trump's rhetoric and actions.
5. **Putin's Goal:** Relieve economic and domestic political pressure from US sanctions on Russia.
    - **Putin's Payout:** Trump tries to roll back, impede, and blunt the impact of sanctions at every step.
6. **Putin's Goal:** Legitimize his regime in the eyes of the world.
    - **Putin's Payout:** Trump repeatedly praises and defends Putin, lending the credibility of the US presidency to Putin's standing.
7. **Putin's Goal:** Revive Russia's status as a great power and gain international recognition for its illegal seizure of Crimea.
    - **Putin's Payout:**Trump publicly says that Crimea is part of Russia and calls for Russia to be welcomed back into the international community with no concessions.
8. **Putin's Goal:** Continue to sow discord in Western democracies and avoid repercussions for interfering in American and European elections.
    - **Putin's Payout:** Trump dismisses Russian interference and has done nothing to prevent future interference, putting him at odds with his own intelligence community.
9. **Putin's Goal:** Soften America's adversarial stance toward Russia.
    - **Putin's Payout:** Trump is shifting the Republican Party's generations-long hawkish views on Russia.
10. **Putin's Goal:** Destabilize the US from within.
    - **Putin's Payout:** Trump attacks US institutions while driving divisive politics and eroding democratic norms.
11. **Putin's goal:** Advance the Kremlin's narrative to shape global

perceptions.

- **Putin's payout:** Trump has repeatedly, and inexplicably, parroted Kremlin talking points across a range of global issues.

12. **Putin's goal:** Undermine international norms and democratic values abroad.

    - **Putin's payout:** Trump has repeatedly failed to respond to human rights violations or support democracy abroad, creating a more permissive environment for autocrats to crack down.

The pattern is clear: Putin has received—and continues to receive—a good payout on his investment in Trump's campaign.

1) Putin's Goal: Weaken and divide the transatlantic alliance. Putin views NATO and the broader transatlantic relationship as Russia's main strategic adversaries. In 2017, the Trump administration released a National Security Strategy outlining this, asserting that, "Russia aims to weaken US influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners. Russia views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats."

Putin's Payout: Trump undermines US relationships with European allies and calls the US's commitment to NATO into question.

- **Trump tried to withdraw the US from NATO.** Trump reportedly stated his desire to withdraw from NATO several times in 2018, complaining "that he did not see the point of the military alliance." This move would essentially destroy the alliance that has been the back-bone of transatlantic security for seventy years, creating a serious strategic crisis for the United States. About this revelation, the former supreme allied commander of NATO noted, "Even discussing the idea of leaving NATO — let alone actually doing so — would be the gift of the century for Putin."
- **Trump attacks specific NATO members that are particularly vulnerable to Russian aggression.** Trump has repeatedly attacked Montenegro, a nation whose decision to join NATO provoked sharp criticism from Russia. Trump claimed that Montenegro has "very aggressive people" and undermined Article 5 by questioning why the US should defend Montenegro at all.
- **Trump refused to recommit to NATO's Article 5 at the opening of the organization's new headquarters.** During his first summit with other NATO leaders, Trump refused to reaffirm America's commitment to Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty, which holds that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all and serves as the foundation of the transatlantic security alliance. Article 5, which has only been invoked once (in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks), is widely considered one of the treaty's most important tenets. It was subsequently reported that Trump's national security team had written language explicitly reaffirming Article 5, only for Trump to later reportedly remove the section without informing his national security staff. Trump later walked back his position, eventually committing to Article 5.
- **The Trump White House considered moving US forces away from Russia's borders.** Upon coming into office, a senior Trump appointee to the National Security Council, Kevin Harrington, proposed withdrawing US military forces from Eastern Europe. He reportedly framed the proposal specifically as an overture to Vladimir Putin as part of a strategy to "reframe our interests within the context of a new relationship with Russia."
- **Trump often presents NATO as a protection racket.** In an interview with *The New York Times*, Trump laid out his belief that the US should only defend NATO allies who have "fulfilled their obligations to us." As the former US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul has explained, this framing misses the entire point of the alliance: "This framing of alliance relationships as protection-racket contracts misses the strategic value of allies to the United States. We want allies to keep

the peace, fight alongside us in times of war and defend our common values—long-term strategic objectives that stretch well beyond any debate about national military budgets."

- **Trump reinstated economic sanctions against Iran, despite protests from European allies.** This move, which came in August and November 2018 as part of the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, sparked protest from European officials who noted that the sanctions would put pressure on the European economy. In a joint statement, top officials from Britain, France, Germany, and the UK reaffirmed their commitment to "protect European economic operators engaged in legitimate business with Iran."
- **Trump is withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.** The Trump administration announced its plans to leave the treaty in October 2018. Although Russia has repeatedly violated the treaty, the Trump administration's withdrawal appeared to be more about National Security Adviser John Bolton's ideological opposition to arms control agreements, shifting the blame for the treaty's collapse onto the US and worsening tensions with European allies opposed to a unilateral US withdrawal.

2) Putin's Goal: Degrade the European Union and foster pro-Russian political movements. A stable and unified Europe, one that values human rights and liberal democracy, greatly constrains and undermines Russia. The success of a vibrant liberal and democratic EU provides a direct contrast to Putin's corrupt regime. More tangibly, EU sanctions strangle Russia economically, and European unity hinders Russia's efforts to bully its neighbors and build alliances with EU members. A divided Europe, on the other hand, would enable Russia to threaten and pressure former Soviet satellite states and expand its influence in Europe.

Putin's Payout: Trump attacks the EU and actively supports anti-EU, Kremlin-backed parties.

- **Trump continually disparages the EU.** Trump has repeatedly spoken negatively about the EU, falsely stating that "the European Union, of course, was set up to take advantage of the United States."
- **The Trump administration downgraded the status of the EU Ambassador to the US.** The EU was downgraded from the equivalent of a country to a "head of delegation," and neither the ambassador nor the EU were informed of the decision.
- **Trump's Secretary of State went to Brussels to undermine and disparage the EU.** Secretary Mike Pompeo traveled to the EU capital in December where he gave a speech attacking the European Union and calling on member states to reassert their sovereignty.
- **Trump openly supported the Brexit campaign**. Trump has been a vocal supporter of Brexit for years, calling it "smart" and even promising to move quickly on a trade deal with the UK after the UK formally withdraws. Incidentally, Russia has been a strong supporter of Brexit, notably interfering in the historic British referendum by initiating a complex operation in support of the anti-EU Leave campaign.
- **Trump supported National Front leader Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French presidential election.** During the election, Trump offered support for Le Pen, stating in an interview that Le Pen is "strongest on borders, and she's the strongest on what's been going on in France." Le Pen and her far-right National Front party ran on a platform promising to remove France from the EU. She has a strong pro-Putin stance and has received active support from the Kremlin in the form of both money and a Russian cyber-campaign targeting Le Pen's opponent.
- **Trump has heaped praise on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.** Trump has said nothing but glowing things about Orban, who leads an illiberal, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic movement in Hungary. Orban also endorsed Trump in the 2016 election.

- **Trump began his first European trip by going to Poland, which is currently rolling back democratic institutions and pulling away from the rest of the EU.** On his initial visit to Europe for the NATO summit as president, Trump first visited Poland. Many interpreted this as a snub to the EU, whose relationship with the conservative and increasingly autocratic Polish government has become more strained. While in Warsaw, Trump also gave a right-wing nationalist speech during which he attacked American leaders, undermined his own intelligence services, and remained silent on controversial actions by the right-wing Polish government.
- **Trump's new Ambassador in Berlin announced he is explicitly supporting right-wing movements.** In a breach of protocol, Trump-appointed ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell gave an interview to Breitbart news where he said "I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe," including right-wing pro-Russian Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz.
- **Trump bluntly tried to persuade France to leave the EU.** In April 2018, Trump reportedly asked French President Emmanuel Macron, "Why don't you leave the EU?" and suggested that the US could offer France a better trade deal. This directly contradicts the US's stated policy.

Case Study: Germany

Putin's Goal: Degrade German Chancellor Angela Merkel's influence as the leading voice in the EU. As the head of the largest economy and most powerful country in the EU, Merkel is the foremost custodian of the liberal west. Furthermore, Merkel and Putin have long had a contentious relationship rooted in personal distrust and opposing world views.

Putin's Payout: Trump is destroying America's relationship with Germany, and personally attacking Chancellor Merkel.

- **Trump has repeatedly been rude to Merkel in public, high-profile situations.** In March 2017, Trump refused to shake hands with Merkel during her visit to the White House. As CNN described the encounter, "The tense moment between the American and German leaders comes after Trump repeatedly bashed Merkel on the campaign trail and accused her of 'ruining Germany,' citing the nation's policies allowing refugees into the nation."
- **Trump demeaned Merkel during the G7 Summit.** In front of other world leaders, Trump also reportedly threw Starburst on the table in front of Merkel during the 2018 G7 summit and said "Here, Angela. Don't say I never give you anything."
- **Trump has attacked Germany on trade.** Trump has publicly complained about the number of German cars on the American market. He also accused Merkel of being "so protectionist" about German trade policies, and US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross has announced plans to "launch an investigation into whether automobile imports are hurting US national security."
- **Trump has criticized Germany on issues related to migration and crime**. Trump tweeted on June 18, 2018, "The people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition. Crime in Germany is way up. Big mistake made all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their culture!"
- **The Pentagon is exploring moving troops from Germany.** *The Washington Post* reported that the Department of Defense is currently analyzing the cost and impact of withdrawing or transferring American troops stationed in Germany.

3) Putin's Goal: Disrupt American leadership and dominance of the global economic order. Putin resents the structure of the global economic order and America's central role in international finance. In addition to the obvious

economic and geopolitical benefits to the US, America is also able use its unique position to leverage access to its capital markets, which makes tools such as economic sanctions so impactful. Putin seeks to disrupt this system and weaken America's hand.

Putin's Payout: Trump is eagerly pushing for an all-out trade war with Europe.

- **Trump has imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports**. In what can only be interpreted as an effort to disrupt the economic strength of a united Europe, the tariffs began a rapidly escalating trade war with US allies after months of economic threats against Western Europe.
- **Trump has publicly threatened to impose tariffs on European cars.** The EU has responded with targeted sanctions on American goods, including Harley-Davidson Inc. motorcycles, bourbon, and around 200 additional categories, including corn, cigarettes, cosmetics, and steel.
- **Trump ended negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).** This was a trade partnership focused on decreasing barriers to trade between the US and EU countries. After he was elected, Trump froze the talks and lashed out at the EU for their "very unfair" trade policies.
- **Trump threatened the EU with sanctions after pulling out of the Iran deal.** Not only has the Trump administration created a divide with European leaders by violating the nuclear agreement with Iran, considered one of the EU's greatest foreign policy accomplishments, the Trump administration also threatened to impose sanctions on European companies that do business in Iran under the conditions of the agreement.
- **Trump wants to leave the World Trade Organization.** Trump has repeatedly told top White House officials that he wants to withdraw the United States from the WTO, which he believes was "designed by the rest of the world to screw the United States." A US withdrawal from the WTO would throw the global trading system into disarray.

4) Putin's Goal: Build global resentment and distrust towards the US and stoke anti-Americanism. Putin sees the US as Russia's geopolitical rival. Therefore, he believes that undermining the US's reputation abroad advances Russia's interests. As the US and its allies have become increasingly critical of each other, longstanding partnerships based on shared values have been strained. This leaves Russia poised to create new, more transactional alliances with other Western nations.

Putin's Payout: America's closest allies are explicitly suspicious and distrusting of the US because of Trump's rhetoric and actions.

- **Both Germany and Canada have implied that the era of American global leadership is over.** The day after the May 2017 NATO summit in Brussels, Merkel told a crowd in Germany that it could no longer rely on the transatlantic relationship, saying, "The times in which we could rely fully on others—they are somewhat over. This is what I experienced in the last few days. We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands." Trump's decision to impose tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum prompted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to label it "a turning point in the Canada-US relationship." Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland also gave a speech where she thanked the United States for its long stewardship of the international system during the post-war era, implicitly suggesting that this leadership is now over.
- **Germany is developing an "America strategy" to cope with changes in its relationship with the US.** The German Foreign Office reportedly began working on the first-ever America strategy, with the goal of producing a strategic document along the lines what Germany traditionally develops with respect to its adversaries like Russia.
- **Trump refused to endorse the joint statement issued at the end of**

the 2018 G7 summit in Canada. After Prime Minister Trudeau publicly stated that Canada would have no choice but to retaliate against US tariffs, Trump tweeted, "Based on Justin [Trudeau]'s false statements at his news conference, and the fact that Canada is charging massive tariffs to our US farmers, workers and companies, I have instructed our US Reps not to endorse the Communique as we look at Tariffs on automobiles flooding the US Market!"

- **Tensions with France have risen.** After Trump refused to sign the G7 communiqué, President Macron's office said in an official statement that "international cooperation cannot depend on fits of anger or little words," pledging to stand behind the final G7 communiqué.
- **Anti-Americanism is increasing.** Trump's presidency has impacted America's influence in Western Europe, as international confidence in the president fell from 64% during former US President Barack Obama's final years to 22% at the beginning of Trump's term. Out of more than 35 countries polled, only Russia and Israel showed higher confidence in the presidency under Trump. Current polling numbers on international opinions of the US resemble those during 2008, when opposition to the Iraq War strained transatlantic relationships.
- **European leaders are reaching out to Russia.** Meanwhile, European leaders have pivoted their focus to Russia, with European Commission President Jean-Claude Junker calling to "re-establish" contact with Russia. French President Macron also met with Putin in May 2018.

5) Putin's Goal: Relieve economic and domestic political pressure from US sanctions on Russia. American and European sanctions against Russia have seriously damaged the Russian economy and have personally impacted the Russian officials on whom Putin's support depends. Putin's 2015 national security strategy explicitly stated the goal of creating a "favourable external environment that would allow Russia's economy to grow steadily and become more competitive;" sanctions repeal would be a necessary step towards achieving this goal.

Putin's Payout: Trump tries to roll back, impede, and blunt the impact of sanctions at every step.

- **The Trump administration decided to lift sanctions on three companies linked to Oleg Deripaska, a powerful Russian oligarch and Putin ally with ties to the Russia investigation.** The sanctions were originally intended as retaliation for election interference, and the Trump administration's decision to lift these sanctions further serves to benefit Deripaska and his business empire. Deripaska helped fund former Trump campaign manager Paul Manfort's work on behalf of Russian interests for years, and Manafort reportedly tried to use his position on Trump's campaign to repay his debts to Deripaska in 2016.
- **Trump issued an executive order effectively undermining proposed sanctions legislation.** In September 2018, under pressure for not doing enough to protect America's election infrastructure, Trump signed an executive order (EO) establishing a process by which the Director of National Intelligence can investigate foreign interference in US elections and outlining mandatory sanctions that will go into effect if such interference is found. While on the surface the EO appeared to be action in the face of ongoing Russian interference, it prompted pushback from both sides of the aisle, with members of Congress arguing that the order "fell short and that only legislation could force tough action against Moscow." Specifically, the executive order undermined momentum behind the Deter Act, which would immediately impose mandatory and severe economic sanctions in response to Russian election interference. One sponsor of the bill, Senator Chris Van Hollen, called the executive order a version of the Deter Act "without the teeth."
- **The Trump administration has repeatedly delayed sanctions required by law for use of chemical weapons.** The Trump administration originally ignored its obligation to trigger sanctions against Russia under the 1991 Chemical and Biological Weapons Control

and Warfare Elimination Act for its use of Novichok agent in the attempted assassination of former GRU agent and dissident Sergei Skripal. The State Department only moved forward after the lead Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee , Ed Royce (R-CA) formally requested that the administration comply with the law. The second, more severe, round of sanctions was due to go into place in November, however no details about the administration's progress have been announced, prompting Rep. Royce to declare, "It is unacceptable that the administration lacks a plan – or even a timeline – for action on the second round of mandatory sanctions required by US law."

- **Trump immediately tried to repeal Obama-era sanctions upon taking office.** Almost immediately after entering the White House, Trump officials tasked the State Department with developing a plan to lift existing sanctions against Russia, return diplomatic compounds from which the Obama administration had expelled Russian diplomats in retaliation for the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 election, and implement additional steps to placate Moscow.
    - These efforts alarmed State Department officials, who immediately began lobbying congressional leaders to pass legislation to block the move.
    - State Department Sanctions Coordinator Ambassador Dan Fried reportedly grew so concerned that he contacted allies on Capitol Hill to urge them to quickly pass legislation that would "codify" Obama-era sanctions, making it difficult for Trump to lift them.
- **Trump vigorously opposed Congressional sanctions legislation**. Congress did not share Trump's eagerness to lift sanctions, and soon put forward the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), bipartisan legislation that enacted additional sanctions against Russia in response to Russia's interference in the 2016 election. The Trump administration forcefully lobbied against the bill.
    - After CAATSA passed in both houses with overwhelming majorities, Trump issued a signing statement opposing the bill, calling it "seriously flawed" and suggesting that sections of the legislation are unconstitutional.
- **Trump failed to properly implement sanctions legislation.** The Trump administration delayed sanctions implementation and missed a key implementation deadline, which it ultimately only met after intervention by congressional leaders. The Trump administration also made a mockery of an important report on Russian oligarchs required by CAATSA, originally intended to map out a network of Russian oligarchs and regime insiders.
    - Those placed on this list could face significant sanctions, including having their visas banned and US-based assets frozen. Despite serious work by career officials to develop the required list, the administration instead released a list that was simply copied from the *Forbes* ranking of the wealthiest Russians and Russian government websites. The lack of methodology combined with the broad scope of inclusion essentially made the list pointless: a list where everyone is included means no one is included.
    - CAATSA also required the Treasury Department to write a report outlining the impact of additional sanctions on Russian sovereign debt and derivatives. The goal was to preempt future attempts to meddle in the 2016 election by outlining a "nuclear option" that would severely damage the Russian economy. Instead, the administration released a report concluding that imposing such sanctions would be too dangerous, thereby reassuring rather than deterring Russia.
- **The sanctions that were eventually announced were extremely limited.** The administration sanctioned five entities and nineteen individuals in March 2018 for their interference in the 2016 election, but because most of these individuals and entities were already under sanctions and/or had been previously been indicted by the Special

Counsel, this round of sanctions was meaningless. Early in April 2018, the Treasury Department finally issued new sanctions against seven Russian oligarchs and twelve companies they own or control, as well as seventeen Russian government officials. While the sanctions against these individuals were forceful, this round of sanctions was clearly incomplete, and there have yet to be any significant additional sanctions announced. Instead the administration has dedicated energy to reducing the burden on Oleg Deripaska, sometimes called "Putin's oligarch".

- **Trump has continued to advocate for Putin's views on US sanctions.** Following a meeting with Putin in Vietnam on the sidelines of the 2017 APEC conference, Trump said, "People don't realize Russia has been very, very heavily sanctioned. They were sanctioned at a very high level, and that took place very recently. It's now time to get back to healing a world that is shattered and broken. Those are very important things. And I feel that having Russia in a friendly posture, as opposed to always fighting with them, is an asset to the world and an asset to our country, not a liability." This occurred while Trump was facing criticism at home for not implementing the sanctions legislation.

6) Putin's Goal: Legitimize his regime in the eyes of the world. Russia's reputation on the world stage has plummeted in recent years. From the state-sponsored doping scandal during the Sochi Olympics, to the illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and the resulting conflict, to Russia's horrific human rights record, the rest of the world, and especially Western countries, have come to view Russia in a harsh light. Putin is now seeking to legitimize himself and his regime, in order to preserve his sphere of influence both domestically and internationally.

Putin's Payout: Trump repeatedly praises and defends Putin, lending the credibility of the US presidency to Putin's standing.

- **Trump has actively sought to hide the content of at least five meetings with Putin from U.S. government officials.** After a 2017 meeting in Hamburg, Trump reportedly confiscated notes from his interpreter and instructed him to not tell any other officials what happened in the meeting. During the 2018 G20 in Argentina, Trump met with Putin for a brief conversation without a translator or note taker.
- **Trump attended a summit in Helsinki that was a clear diplomatic coup for Putin.** On July 16, 2018, the world watched, stunned, as President Donald Trump declined to affirm his loyalty to his country and the rule of law and instead aligned himself with the head of a hostile foreign power who ordered an unprecedented attack on American democracy. The Helsinki Summit between Trump and Putin brought to the surface a concern best expressed by *The Washington Post*editorial board: "In Helsinki, Mr. Trump again insisted 'there was no collusion' with Russia. Yet in refusing to acknowledge the plain facts about Russia's behavior, while trashing his own country's justice system, Mr. Trump in fact was openly colluding with the criminal leader of a hostile power." To make matters worse, the pronouncements coming out of Helsinki may very well have been tempered due to the fact that the Special Counsel indicted 12 Russian military intelligence officers only two days beforehand, which would have made any pro-Russian announcements politically impossible.
- **Trump considered Putin's request to hand over American officials to the Russian government.** During the summit in Helsinki, Putin suggested that in exchange for allowing the special counsel to interview indicted Russians about their role in the 2016 election interference campaign, Russian officials could be allowed to question US officials the Kremlin has accused of interfering in its own affairs. Trump called this an "incredible offer," and White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders initially refused to rule it out. Current and former US officials were outraged that Trump would consider such a proposition, and the State Department called the idea "absolutely absurd." Former US ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, who was named on the list,

demanded that the president defend American citizens against these Russian attacks. The White House eventually spoke out against the idea just immediately before the Senate voted 98 to 0 to approve a resolution stating that no US official should be interrogated by the Russian government.

- **Trump praises Putin incessantly.** Trump has repeatedly praised Putin, saying Putin is "a leader" and talking about how he gets along well with Putin. Trump's efforts to legitimize Putin extend beyond superficial compliments to substantive support, often contradicting the interests of the US and the advice of Trump's own national security staff.
- **Trump has defended and validated Russia's malign activity, equating it with American behavior.** When former conservative Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly questioned Trump about his respect for Putin in February 2017, noting that Putin is a "killer," Trump replied, "There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers. Well, you think our country is so innocent?" When questioned about criticism over Putin's often brutal methods of dealing with his opposition in 2015, Trump mirrored Putin's own accusation against the US, asserting that America "does plenty of killing also."
- **Trump validated Putin's fraudulent election by congratulating him.** In March 2018, Putin was reelected to his fourth term as president of Russia (his fifth term as the leader of Russia, including one term as Prime Minister). Like most elections under Putin's rule, the 2018 election was not conducted in accordance with international standards. Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was formally barred from competing in the election and there were widespread allegations of voter fraud and election violations.
  - Two days after the election, Trump spoke with Putin. In his briefing materials for the call, Trump's national security staff explicitly warned him not to congratulate Putin on his victory because of its fraudulent and corrupt nature, even going as far as to reportedly write "DO NOT CONGRATULATE" in capital letters in his briefing material. Trump ignored the warning and offered Putin his congratulations, following it up with discussions of a future meeting between the two leaders. Trump then announced to the world via Twitter that he had congratulated Putin.
- **Trump invited the Russian foreign minister into the Oval Office where he disclosed classified intelligence at the expense of Israel.** In May 2017, prior to the NATO summit, Trump met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and then-Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak in the Oval Office. Trump reportedly told Lavrov and Kislyak that he had fired then-FBI Director James Comey, who he called a "nut job," and told his guests that he "faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off." During the meeting, Trump also reportedly leaked highly classified intelligence shared by Israeli security forces to his guests.
  - Israel had not authorized the US to share the intelligence, which pertained to a Syrian bomb-making effort and was obtained, in part, through a cyber operation. As one unnamed US official put it, Trump "revealed more information to the Russian ambassador than we have shared with our own allies." As a result of this, Israel changed its intelligence sharing protocols with America.
  - No US press were allowed to attend the meeting. The only news outlet present was TASS, a Russian state-owned agency. This was an inexplicable breach of protocol that allowed Russia to control the public's access to the images and content of the meeting.
  - Trump's decision to brag about firing Comey is also telling. After spending months pressuring Comey to drop the investigation into former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Trump fired Comey and later admitted that the firing was due to "this Russia thing."

7) Putin's Goal: Revive Russia's status as a great power and gain

international recognition for its illegal seizure of Crimea. Western leaders denounced Putin's illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea, implementing sanctions that crippled Russia's economy and expelling Russia from the G8. Putin has great incentive to push for international recognition of Crimea as Russian territory. This would serve to further legitimize his regime and his claim that he seeks to reunite territory that he and his supporters argue belong to Russia. Russia's 2015 national security strategy explicitly stated that one of the country's goals is to "[consolidate] the Russian Federation's position as a centre of influence in today's world."

Putin's Payout: Trump publicly says that Crimea is part of Russia and calls for Russia to be welcomed back into the international community without concessions.

- **Trump failed to condemn an aggressive Russian act against Ukraine in the Kerch Strait.** In November 2018, Russia fired on and seized three Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait, capturing their crew members and blocking access through the strait. Trump canceled a meeting with Putin after the incident but failed to take any other action in response to this blatant act of aggression. Initially, Trump stated "we do not like what's happening either way," and although he canceled his planned meeting with Putin at the 2018 G20 in Argentina, he did end up holding a brief and "informal" meeting with Putin on the sidelines of the meeting.
- **Trump called Crimea part of Russia.** Trump's rhetoric on Crimea has been shockingly similar to Putin's. At the June 2018 G7 summit in Canada, Trump reportedly told other G7 leaders that "Crimea is Russian because everyone who lives there speaks Russian." In a public press conference, Trump, rather than blaming the Russian government for invading Crimea, blamed Obama for his perceived inability to prevent the Russian invasion. He made similar comments during the 2016 campaign.
- **Trump suggested that Russia be readmitted to the G7.** At the 2018 summit of international powers, Trump argued for Russia's reinstatement, saying, "we should have Russia at the negotiating table." Trump claimed that allowing Russia to rejoin the organization would profit not just Russia but also the US, all G7 countries, and the world at large, eliciting heavy resistance from both US allies and lawmakers.
- **Trump attended a meeting with Putin with a list of concessions, and no other American was in the room.** Ahead of the 2017 G20 summit, Trump instructed his team to come up with possible concessions to offer at his first bilateral meeting with Putin. The plan to have a formal meeting with Putin, let alone to offer concessions, was met with strong resistance by State Department and NSC officials who feared it would signal acceptance of Russia's interference in the 2016 election and the annexation of Crimea. Trump and Putin also held a second meeting during the G20, which was initially not disclosed, and neither his National Security Advisor Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster nor the Senior Director for Europe and Eurasia Fiona Hill, who has been a Putin critic, were present. Only the Kremlin's interpreter was present for the meeting, which means that no other US official has a record of what occurred.

8) Putin's Goal: Continue to sow discord in Western democracies and avoid repercussions for interfering in American and European elections. In January 2017, the US intelligence community released an assessment concluding that "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election." Despite this unprecedented attack by a foreign adversary, the Trump administration has actively undercut the tools that America would use to respond to the attacks and defend against future ones.

Putin's Payout: Trump dismisses Russian interference and has done nothing to prevent future interference, putting him at odds with his own intelligence community.

- **Trump has stayed quiet even as Russian cyber interference efforts**

continued on his watch. In early 2018, the Democratic National Committee claimed that it was likely attacked by a Russian intelligence-linked hacking group following the 2018 midterms. Trump has thus far failed to condemn the attack. Furthermore, in October 2018, the US Justice Department indicted Russian citizen Elena Khusyaynova, alleging she works as the chief accountant at Project Lakhta. The indictment described Project Lakhta as "a Russian umbrella effort" funded by Yevgeniy Prigozhin and focused on sowing political discord in the US political system, including influencing elections. The Commander-in-Chief has continued to be silent on this subject, even as the U.S. intelligence community's 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment clearly stated that U.S. adversaries are "looking to the 2020 US elections as an opportunity to advance their interests."

- **Trump sided with Putin over his own intelligence community at the Helsinki summit.** Trump has repeatedly called into question the conclusion of US intelligence community, even explicitly saying he believes Putin when he says no election interference occurred. In Helsinki, while the world was watching, Trump not only failed to dispute Putin's denial that the Kremlin was responsible for the hacking and release of Democratic emails in 2016, but he also repeatedly condemned the investigation into that attack and strongly suggested that he believes Putin over his own intelligence community. In an attempt to walk back his statement and reaffirm his belief in his own intelligence community, Trump went on to excuse Russia by saying that other countries may also have been responsible.
- **The Trump administration undermined America's ability to combat Russian disinformation.** Despite the fact that the 2017 US national security strategy explicitly warned about Russian use of media "to undermine the legitimacy of democracies," the Trump administration has consistently undermined the US government's main tool for combatting Russian disinformation, the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC). GEC was specifically "tasked with countering Moscow's disinformation campaign." However, under the Trump administration, the center has suffered from a lack of Russian speaking analysts, a hiring freeze, and budgetary restraints, and there is still no permanent head of the center.
- **Trump has diminished America's cyber defenses and even proposed cyber cooperation with Russia.** While Russia deployed multiple cyber weapons against the US in the 2016 election, the Trump administration has limited the government's ability coordinate a coherent policy.
  - The State Department tried to shutter the Office of Cybersecurity Coordinator until Congress intervened.
  - Former National Security Agency head Admiral Mike Rogers stated he had not been granted the authority by the White House to counter Russian cyber operations "where they originate."
  - Trump even discussed forming a "Cyber Security unit" with Putin when they met at the Hamburg G20 summit in July 2017. Putin reportedly again suggested a cybersecurity working group at the Helsinki summit.
- **Trump gutted the sanctions-coordination team.** The American government's primary tool to respond to Russian interference has been applying sanctions, yet Trump has gutted the team responsible for implementing that policy.
  - In October 2017, the administration shuttered the State Department's sanctions office, eliminating the Coordinator for Sanctions Policy. The office was previously led by Ambassador Daniel Fried, one of the most senior and well-respected career foreign-service officers at the State Department and a former Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia.
  - Now the responsibilities of this office once led by a veteran diplomat with a five-person team have been moved to a single mid-level staff member who works on the topic part time.

9) Putin's Goal: Soften America's adversarial stance on Russia. For the past 70 years, the Republican Party was the party of Russia hawks, advocating a hard line against the Soviet Union and Russia on issues ranging from nuclear posture, human rights, missile defense, and NATO enlargement. These positions were not just vestiges of the Cold War era. In 2012, Mitt Romney, then the Republican Party's nominee for president, famously asserted that Russia was "without question our number one geopolitical foe."

Putin's Payout: Trump is shifting the Republican Party's generations-long hawkish views on Russia.

- **Republicans helped lift sanctions on a Russian oligarch.** Senate Republicans blocked a Democratic bid to force the Treasury Department to keep sanctions on three Russian companies linked to oligarch Oleg Deripaska that the Trump administration was trying to remove. Deripaska is under U.S. sanctions, and he is a central figure in the Special Counsel investigation because of his close ties to Trump's campaign chairman, Paul Manafort. This move comes less than two years after the Senate voted 98-2 to implement further Russia sanctions in retaliation for Russian election interference.
- **Trump granted Putin the honor of an invitation to the White House even as Putin was actively interfering in the midterm elections.** In October 2018, National Security Advisor John Bolton formally invited Putin to Washington, D.C. for a White House visit just as Trump's own administration determined that Russia is actively interfering in the 2018 midterms. This was the Trump administration's second attempt at scheduling a follow-up visit after the Helsinki Summit. The first, immediately following the summit, fell through because of the intense backlash, but Trump apparently feels enough time has lapsed to reextend the invitation.
- **The Trump campaign shifted the 2016 RNC platform to Russia's benefit.** After Republican leaders spent years denouncing Obama's stance against America's "number one geopolitical foe," the Trump campaign edited the party's platform to be more conciliatory toward the Kremlin. Initially, a draft of the RNC platform called for "providing lethal defensive weapons" to Ukraine to combat Russian incursions. Trump adviser J.D. Gordon intervened on behalf of the Trump campaign to soften the final language and call for "providing appropriate assistance" to Ukraine.
  - Beginning in 2014, Republican lawmakers vocally criticized the Obama administration's refusal to provide lethal arms to Ukraine.
  - Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham stated that Putin's invasion of Ukraine "[demanded] more than additional empty rhetoric and threats of lowest-common-denominator sanctions."
  - Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell blamed Obama's "passive" foreign policy for creating an environment in which Putin knew he would not face any consequences for his acts of aggression.
  - Former House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers said at the time, "Putin is playing chess and I think we are playing marbles."
  - With a three-word change, Trump successfully rolled back a crucial GOP criticism of Obama, radically shifting the RNC's platform from an aggressive stance towards Russia to a curiously weaker one.
- **Congressional Republicans embrace stronger ties between the US and Russia.** On July 3 and 4, 2018, a delegation of eight Republicans lawmakers traveled to Moscow to meet with representatives of the Russian government, including Sergey Kislyak and multiple individuals under US sanction. From Moscow, members of the congressional delegation advocated for better relations between the two countries.
- **Trump's constant campaigning on behalf of Russia appears to have had a lasting effect on the Republican electorate.**
  - According to a 2017 Gallup poll, Republicans' views on

Putin jumped by a dramatic twenty points from 2015 to 2017, from a 12% favorable rating to 32%.

- Polling from YouGov shows that Republicans who viewed Putin unfavorably "shrank from 51 percent in July 2014 to just 14 percent in December 2016."
- According to *Politico*, fewer Republicans than Democrats consider Russia "a major national security risk."
- A May 2017 poll showed that 49 percent of Republicans consider Russia an ally, despite clear evidence that Russia interfered in the 2016 election.

10) Putin's Goal: Destabilize the US from within. Russia seeks to sow political, cultural, and social divisions inside America, which the Kremlin views as a way to distract and weaken its adversaries. This is not a new strategy; Russia has historically sought to undermine rivals by stoking preexisting internal divisions.

Putin's Payout: Trump attacks US institutions while driving divisive politics and eroding democratic norms.

- **Trump has decried the press as the "enemy of the people."** Since taking office, Trump has taken an incredibly hostile stance toward the press, denouncing journalists as "the enemy of the American people" and popularizing the term "fake news" to demean credible institutions like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN. This is the same type of language that is used by dictators around the world.
- **Trump is violating established norms, using his power to silence his critics, including former CIA director John Brennan.** Trump revoked Brennan's security clearance in August 2018 in what was viewed by many as a retaliatory act against Brennan, who has been a vocal Trump critic. Brennan denounced the action as a push "to suppress freedom of speech & punish critics."
- **Trump has publicly defended neo-Nazis and repeatedly used racially-charged rhetoric.** Following the August 2017 white nationalists' march in Charlottesville that resulted in the death of one counter-protester, Trump said the white nationalists included some "very fine people," compared the removal of Confederate monuments those of Founding Fathers, and said that the counter-protesters deserve an equal amount of blame for the violence. He has repeatedly decried African-American athletes who protest against police brutality during the performance of the National Anthem, disinviting members of the champion Golden State Warriors and Philadelphia Eagles over the subject. In November 2017, Trump retweeted three propaganda videos from a British hate group which falsely claimed to depict Muslim migrants attacking white citizens. When asked to defend the retweets, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders argued that the veracity of the videos didn't matter so long as the videos promoted Trump's agenda.
- **Trump has actively instituted discriminatory policies.** The administration's first major policy initiative was to deliver on the campaign promise of a "Muslim ban," blocking entry into the US from several Muslim-majority countries. Trump has also advocated creating a database of Muslim citizens in the US. Finally, the Trump administration has implemented a "zero-tolerance" policy toward migrants from Central and South America, which resulted in thousands of children being separated from their parents at the southern border.
- **Trump has advanced conspiracy theories that undermine the democratic process.** Trump has repeatedly asserted, with no evidence, that he only appeared to lose the popular vote in the 2016 election because millions of people voted illegally. He empaneled a commission to "investigate" his baseless allegations, only to disband the group in January 2018 when it proved unable to find significant evidence of voter fraud.

- **Trump has rejected and violated democratic norms and principles.** Trump's political life has largely been defined as a deviation from the established norms and rules of democracy. After entering politics by repeatedly advancing the racist "birther" conspiracy alleging that Obama was not an American citizen, Trump spent his campaign repeatedly advocating for the investigation and imprisonment of his political opponent Hillary Clinton, which he has continued to do since becoming president. He has also claimed that he can pardon himself and anyone for any reason, thus declaring his power to be above the law; that the job of the Attorney General is to protect the president; and that he can make immigration decisions with "no judges or court cases."
- **Trump has lobbed political attacks against the Justice Department, intelligence agencies, and law-enforcement officers.** From advancing conspiracy theories about a deep state out to undermine his presidency, to rejecting the findings of the intelligence community's assessment of Russian interference, to his attacking the FBI for its investigation into his associates, Trump has been feeding a narrative of distrust in American institutions.

11) Putin's goal: Advance the Kremlin's narrative to shape global perceptions. The Kremlin works aggressively to advance a distinct narrative of its actions and of global events. This is an effort not only to cast Russia in a positive light but is designed to advance key Russian policy goals.

Putin's payout: Trump has repeatedly, and inexplicably, parroted Kremlin talking points across a range of global issues.

- **Trump seemingly took Putin's suggestion to suspend American military exercises with South Korea.** At his June summit with North Korean leader Kim Jung Un, Trump announced that the US would suspend military exercises with South Korea, a move previously considered unimaginable. Trump reportedly came up with the idea "after speaking to Russian President Vladimir Putin." What's more, Trump also referred to the military exercises as "war games." This phrase is deliberately not used by US officials, but is used by North Korea and Russia.
- **Trump repeated Kremlin talking points on Afghanistan that directly conflict with stated US positions.** In a televised cabinet meeting that was widely covered by networks, Trump stated that the Soviet Union fell apart after it "went bankrupt fighting in Afghanistan," claiming that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was due to terrorism and that the Soviet Union was "right to be there." While these statements have no basis in history, they are very similar to the Kremlin's revisionist talking points, that are part of part of an effort by Putin to rehabilitate Soviet history. Trump's points contradict the stance of U.S. State Department historians and are taken straight from the Kremlin.
- **Trump's White House directed national security staff to look into fake events that only appeared as part of a Kremlin-directed propaganda campaign.** Trump aides reportedly "sought information about Polish incursions in Belarus." However, no such incursions occurred. These events only exist in the form of a disinformation campaign by the GRU against Poland – whose nationalist government is anti-Russian – on behalf of Belarus – Russia's closest ally.
- **At the 2018 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Trump effectively delivered Putin's talking points on sovereignty.** Despite the Trump administration's continuous refusal to protect American democracy against blatant Russian interference, Trump's 2018 UNGA speech focused primarily on the idea of protecting national sovereignty — a favorite position of Putin's and other dictators around the world who worry about international interference in their domestic crackdowns. As further proof that America's stature has fallen in the eyes of world leaders, Trump's boast that his administration "has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country" prompted actual laughter from the audience.

Case Study: Syria

Putin's Goal: Expand Russian influence in the Middle East. As Russia seeks to expand its global influence, it has paid special attention to increasing its presence in the Middle East. Russia has long backed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, putting Russian forces in conflict with the U.S.-backed opposition rebels.

Putin's Payout: Trump decided to withdraw US troops from Syria, leaving room for Russia to exert further influence.

- **Trump's decision will allow Russia to consolidate control over the region.** Withdrawing US troops from Syria leaves Russia and Iran as the major power players in the conflict. One Russian political commentator noted that Putin's goal was always "to establish himself as the global authority to prevent regime change," and the absence of US troops leaves a vacuum that Putin will be eager to fill.
- **Trump's insistence on moving forward with such a blatantly pro-Russia foreign policy move sparked Mattis' resignation.** The withdrawal announcement led to Defense Secretary Mattis' resignation, and he noted in his resignation letter that Russia seeks to "shape a world consistent with [its] authoritarian model" and to "promote [its] own interests at the expense of [its] neighbors."
- **Trump used Putin's own excuse to withdraw troops.** In December 2017, Putin declared victory over ISIS in Syria and announced a partial withdrawal of troops. This declaration was met with great skepticism from the US. A White House National Security Council spokeswoman called the declaration of victory "premature," and Russian forces have since remained extremely active in Syria. In a strikingly similar statement, Trump credited his own decision to withdraw to the defeat of ISIS as well, agreeing with Putin over the US intelligence community, and his own party on the issue. Putin praised him for using the same reasoning, stating that he "generally agree[d]" with Trump's evaluation of ISIS.
- **Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria sparked praise from Putin.** Putin immediately praised the decision, as "correct," restating the belief that US troops should have never been in Syria to begin with. Putin stated that unlike the Russian troops, US troops were never invited, and denounced US involvement in Syria as illegitimate.

12) Putin's goal: Undermine international norms and democratic values abroad. Putin seeks to create an international environment that is more permissive of repression, especially against dissidents that may threaten autocratic regimes.

Putin's payout: Trump has repeatedly failed to respond to human rights violations or support democracy abroad, creating a more permissive environment for autocrats to crack down

- **Trump failed to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for the murder of a *Washington Post* journalist by an autocrat.** Although the CIA concluded that the crown prince of Saudi Arabia authorized the brutal murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Trump refused to publicly condemn the killing. Instead, he stated "It could very well be that the crown prince had knowledge of this tragic event — maybe he did and maybe he didn't!" Many congressional members, including Republicans, condemned the murder, although Russia was noticeably silent on the matter. US silence over the murder of an American-based journalist, creates a more permissive environment for autocratic leaders to commit future abuses.
- **The Trump administration has attacked the International Criminal Court (ICC).** John Bolton chose his first major public address as National Security Adviser to announce that the US would seek to sanction and prosecute International Criminal Court (ICC) officials in retaliation for the ICC's demand for an investigation into potential war crimes committed by

US troops in Afghanistan. Bolton called the ICC "illegitimate" and "a threat to American sovereignty and national security," and threatened retaliation against any other countries that cooperated with the Afghanistan probe. Putin opposes the international institution dedicated to human rights, withdrawing Russia's membership in 2016 after the ICC released a report classifying the annexation of Crimea as an occupation.

- **Trump administration was silent on China's disappearance of the President of Interpol.** In September 2018, the president of the international policing agency Interpol mysteriously disappeared while traveling to his native China. It was later revealed that he was detained by Chinese authorities. This was an audacious step, even for the increasingly authoritarian party system of Xi Jinping. Yet, astonishingly, there was no response from the Trump administration for this assault on the international institution and this human rights abuse.
- **The Trump administration has repeatedly been silent on issues human rights abuses around the world.** The Trump administration has always been clear that human rights are not a priority. During Trump's first year in office, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson failed to hold a press conference to roll out the State Department's annual human rights report, and Tillerson later implied that prioritizing human rights might create "obstacles" for the U.S. Furthermore, the Trump administration's policy of refusing to condemn international human rights abuses is weakening international democratic standards: Trump is silent about the human rights violations committed by China against the ethnic Uighur population, his administration has refused to speak out against the violent persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and he stood by as far-right Hungarian leader Viktor Orban forced the liberal Central European University out of Hungary.

Even the Administration's "Strong" Actions on Russia Do Not Hold Up

Trump's defenders often point to two data points to argue that Trump has taken a strong stance against Russia: the decision to provide lethal aid to Ukraine and the White House's condemnation of Russia for the lethal nerve agent attack against Sergei Skripal by expelling 60 Russian diplomats and closing the Russian consulate in Seattle. However, upon closer scrutiny, it's clear that these actions were pushed by a few members of the Trump administration that are no longer there: former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Since they have left the administration, replaced by John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, there has been very little if any action to hold Russia accountable. There have been no significant sanctions since McMaster's last week in office last April. In fact, Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin, with the aid of Senate Republicans, is instead working to soften those April sanctions.

Lethal Aid to Ukraine

The Trump administration in late 2017 approved a deal providing lethal aid to Ukraine. However, the context of the decision is important to keep in mind. The debate over lethal assistance during the Obama administration was largely over how Russia would interpret such assistance. When President Obama decided against providing lethal assistance, he did so out of concern that Russia would interpret such a move as a hostile, escalatory act, which could provoke Russia to intensify its military activities. Under Trump, however, Putin had every reason to interpret the White House's decision as neither hostile nor escalatory, given Trump's overall pro-Russian stance.

Furthermore, providing lethal assistance lost much of its military significance by the time the Trump administration made the decision. In 2014-2015, when the front lines of the conflict were constantly changing and there were fears that Russia would expand its invasion to other parts of Ukraine, a weapon like the anti-tank Javelin missile could have done significant damage to the Russian tanks that spearheaded Russia's counter-offensive against Ukrainian forces. By

late 2017, the defensive lines had been established. While fighting is still fierce and ongoing, the conflict is considerably more stable and may be settling into another "frozen conflict" on Russia's periphery. The current low-intensity combat is not defined by battles involving heavy weaponry like tanks. The structure of the arms deal was also not as beneficial as it could have been. The weapons reportedly were not delivered on the line of conflict. Instead, they were to be stored in training centers in western Ukraine away from the combat and would be monitored by American soldiers, thus reducing access and effectiveness. Finally, reporting in *The New York Times* suggests that the Ukrainian government ceased cooperating with Mueller's investigative team shortly after the Trump administration approved the sale of lethal weapons, raising the possibility that the decision was part of a quid-pro-quo arrangement to reduce the legal pressure on the president.

Response to the Skripal Poisoning

In March 2018, Russia poisoned Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy living in the United Kingdom. British authorities later determined that the chemical nerve agent used in the poisoning originated in Russia. This attack was described by British Prime Minister Theresa May as an "unlawful use of force" on British soil. Although then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was quick to follow in May's footsteps in denouncing Russia's involvement in the poisoning, the Trump White House initially stayed quiet, avoiding naming Russia as the likely perpetrator of the attack. When Trump finally spoke on the matter, he initially wavered on Russia's involvement, saying "it sounds to me like they believe it was Russia," and adding, "if we agree with them [the UK], we will condemn Russia or whoever it may be." Trump's rhetoric here undermined the transatlantic alliance by calling Britain's assertion into doubt and refusing to immediately back them up in condemning Russian actions. Eventually, White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders did release a statement naming Russia as the perpetrator.

By then, however, the global reaction had grown from statements to action: More than 20 countries expelled over 100 Russian diplomats as a result of the poisoning. As part of this international response, the Trump administration expelled 60 Russian diplomats and closed the Russian consulate in Seattle. These actions were overseen by the then-National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster the same week the president announced McMaster would be leaving (the administration also announced the most significant election-tampering sanctions to date on McMaster's last week in office). This decision appeared to contradict Trump's reported demand that the US "match [the] numbers [of expelled diplomats]" of its European allies. "We're not taking the lead," Trump insisted, "We're matching." When the US did finally announce its expulsion of 60 officials, Trump was reportedly furious that France and Germany were each only expelling four Russian diplomats and that the US appeared to be more forward-leaning in its response than its European partners.

Conclusion

Since the very beginning, the Trump White House has demonstrated a clear and consistent pattern of behavior towards Russia, helping to fulfill many of Russian President Vladimir Putin's most important foreign policy objectives.

Trump's decisions have repeatedly benefited Russian foreign policy goals often at the cost of his own country's priorities or the priorities of traditional US allies. This is despite the fact that Russia conducted an unprecedented political assault on America, an assault that is ongoing and continues to target American elections.

This raises the question: Whose interests is Trump serving?

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